The Present Status of Research in the Pennsylvania German Dialect

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The first group of German settlers in Pennsylvania landed in Philadelphia in 1683. In the year 1775 their number was already about 110,000. They belonged for the most part to the lower social stratum of the population. Among themselves they therefore spoke their native dialects, although they had High German services in their churches, High German instruction in their parochial schools and High German newspapers.

Such a continuous intercourse of speakers in various dialects resulted in a sort of compromise, although the dialect of the majority of the speakers: "Rheinpfaelzisch" (the dialect of the Rhenish Palatinate) was victorious. It seems that the dialectal differences have in various places been smoothed out and melted finally into a unit that appears quite homogeneous. Very early many loan-words were already taken over from the English. In Christopher Saur's newspaper **Der Hochdeutsche Pennsylvanische Geschicht-schreiber** (founded in 1739) we find: fens, store, schapkiper, packet-buch, etc. **Die Philadelphische Korrespondenz** (1784) makes fun of the number of borrowings in the spoken dialect. (1) The criticisms of outsiders were even more severe. Joh. Schoepf, in his book **Reise durch einige der mittleren und suedlichen vereinigten Nordamerikanischen Staaten in den Jahren 1783 und 1784** (Erlangen 1788), deplores the formation of "Pennsylvania Dutch" or "Pennsylfawnisch Deitsch" for patriotic reasons.

The numerous borrowings are responsible for the absurd question which was seriously asked by a writer in the Pennsylvania German dialect, whether the latter was a dialect of German or a dialect of English. (2) E. M. Fogel complains in 1925: "The Nichtwisser still maintain that Pennsylvania German is only a mixture of bad English and worse German."

The exclusively English instruction in the public schools makes the number of speakers of the dialect decrease from year to year. It is significant that a large percentage of those that only spoke the dialect in their childhood retain merely a passive knowledge of it later on. A. R. Horne mentions "six to eight hundred thousand inhabitants of eastern Pennsylvania, to whom English is as much a dead language as Latin or Greek" in the preface to the second edition of his **Pennsylvania German Manual** (1895). In 1902 Lee. L. Grumbine calls the dialect "the fast declining dialect of a foreign tongue." Some rather optimistic estimates put the number of active dialect speakers as high as several hundred thousand for the present time. But Knauss is no doubt right in saying in 1922: "The time seems not far distant when the last vestige of the remarkable Pennsylvania German dialect will have vanished." The dialect seems to have died out in some of the western counties of Pennsylvania now. It is rapidly disappearing in Lancaster County, one of the former centers of the dialect, and in the various secondary settlements in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Maryland, and elsewhere. The collapse of the instruction of German after the World War, the lack of prestige of the dialect among most of the educated people of Pennsylvania German descent, all help to speed up this process of gradual disappearance. But in spite of this continuous, steady decrease in the number of speakers, it is still very large and probably still the largest original linguistic minority in the United States.

Dialect literature becomes especially important for all those who have not the opportunity of being in immediate constant contact with the speakers of a dialect. The Pennsylvania German dialect literature is a product of the nineteenth century. The first lines that were printed in the dialect are to be found in the newspaper **Der Deutsche in Amerika** in 1841, and in **Der Friedensbote** in 1846. The first poem in the dialect appeared in 1849 in **Der Kirchenfreund.** Since then the literature has increased considerably. Harry H. Reichard was able to mention a large number of dialect writers in his comprehensive bibliography. (3) Heinz Kloss Published in 1931 a long article on Pennsylvania German literature. (4)

To what extent has this dialect, which is almost unique as to origin and history, been investigated? —The vocabulary of the dialect has been dealt with rather fully by several Pennsylvania Germans for practical reasons. A. R. Horne states it frankly in the preface of his **Pennsylvania German Manual:** "to render such assistance to those who speak Pennsylvania German only, as will enable them the more readily to acquire the English, has induced us to prepare this manual." Horne's next book, the **Pennsylvanisch-Deitsch Buch"**, contained 5522 German (in English spelling) and 176 English words. E. R. Rauch published in 1879 his **Pennsylvania Dutch Handbook,** which contained 5000 German and 1000 English words. J. C. Lins published a dictionary in 1887 "to aid such Pennsylvania Germans as are anxious to acquire a knowledge of the English language." W. J. Hoffmann used for his word-list in 1888 the phonetic spelling applied by the Bureau of American Ethnology in recording Indian languages. The last and most complete presentation of the German words of the dialect is M. B. Lambert's **Dictionary of the Non-English Words of the Pennsylvania German Dialect** (1924) which contains 16,438 words.

Besides these dictionaries, which owe their existence to pedagogical rather than scientific interest, there are two studies which treat all the aspects of the dialect, and not only the vocabulary. One is today merely of historical interest, i. e., Prof. S. S. Halderman's book: **Pennsylvania Dutch: a dialect of South German with an infusion of English** (Philadelphia 1872). Haldeman succeeded in getting a scholar like Alexander Ellis interested in Pennsylvania German. He writes in **Early English Pronunciation,** pp. 652-663: "perceiving at once the analogy between the debased German with English intermixture and Chaucer's debased Anglo-Saxon with Norman intermixture, I requested and obtained as much further information as enabled me to give an account of the singular modern reproduction of the manner in which our English language itself was built up, and inserted it in the introduction to my chapter on Chaucer's pronunciation."

The only scientifically valuable treatment that is in existence, a study that deals with phonology, morphology and syntax, is the one by Marion Dexter Learned, **The Pennsylvania German Dialect,** (American Journal of Philology, 1889). Learned presents a complete morphology of the dialect, and tries to give a syntax. He takes up the problem of the mixture of German and English, and studies the type of borrowing. He never fails to give the historical equivalents (e. g. Penn. German **ei** represents Gothic **i**, Old High German **iu**, **i**—Umlant of **au**, etc.) but unfortunately no phonetical and localized variants of pronunciation are mentioned, because his time knew of no dialect geography. At the present time Albert J. Buffington (Harvard) is working on a doctor's dissertion **A Grammatical and Linguistic Study of Pennsylvania German,** based on his own pronunciation of the dialect.

The status of research in the Pennsylvania German dialect is at present therefore as follows: almost the entire native and part of the borrowed vocabulary have been recorded, some principles of borrowing, the morphology and some syntactical phases have been established, but there is at this writing no phonetical treatment, to say nothing of one that might be called in the modern sense phonemical. The most considerable gap is this: there is no phonetical field-record of the Pennsylvania German dialect, not even a single sample.

Field-work would provide the foundation for attacking a number of extremely interesting problems. I shall now call attention to an extensive, and practically untouched, field for study. The following questions present themselves:

I.—The question whether the dialect is really so uniform and homogeneous as the authors of the dictionaries seem to assume. The large expansion of the territory where the Pennsylvania German is, or at least used to be, spoken, and the different extraction of the settlers would seem to make a development of various local types more likely. There can be no doubt, even according to our present sketchy knowledge of the dialect, that there are different local variations in it. Learned mentioned the vacillation between **kleid and kleed, reye** and **rege,** the pronunciation **guot** for **gut (good)** in certain parts of Pennsylvania, etc. Cyrus H. Eshleman, (5) who sent a questionnaire to fifteen places in Lancaster County, found that the pronunciations **Apfel and Pfund** still existed beside the prevalent **Appel** and **Pund.** The dialectal variations of the vocabulary are even more pronounced than the phonological ones: **Maedeli** in Lancaster Co. corresponds to **Maedche** in Lehigh Co. In **Plantnames and Plantlore Among the Pennsylvania Germans,** Liek and Brendle show that **Prunus Virginiana** in Lebanon Co. is called **Fogelkarsche,** but **Maulzieher** in Montgomery Co., and elsewhere **Wildkarsche.** Also the number of borrowings from English varies in different localities. Learned noticed a greater number among writers from the Northeast than from the Southwest.

II.—The question which German dialect of the present time more nearly resembles the Pennsylvania German is closely connected with the one concerning various types of the dialect. The result of Emil Boehmer's study **Sprach und Gruendungsgeschichte der pfaelzischen Colonie am Niederrhein** (Marburg 1909) indicates that, although the dialect of the colony is very similar to that of Kusel, the settlers really came from Simmern and Kreuznach. Lambert assumed a similarity with the Westrich type of the Palatinate dialects. Eshleman proved that not the dialect of the western part of the Palatinate, but that of the eastern, rather than the northeastern part, was most similar to Pennsylvania German. Boehmer's result teaches us, therefore, not to draw any inferences as to the homes of the settlers from a compromise dialect. Eshleman had the advice of the wellknown scholar of the Palatinate dialects, Ernst Christman. We hope that his researches mark only the beginnings of more specialized investigations.

III.—A detailed investigation of vocabulary, syntactical schemes, and above all, of the phonology of the English of the earlier speakers of the dialect, would be extremely valuable. The intermediate stages in the change of language of individual speakers are still unknown. It is doubtful whether the transformation of the phonemic system is gradually achieved or with a jump. The loan words in the Pennsylvania German dialect show substitutions of sounds: **Welvet** from velvet, **schmaert** from smart, **badder** from bother. Is this only a transition stage, leading to a truly English phonemic system, or is that "Pennsylvania English"? The existence of such a "Pennsylvania English," as the dialect of a territory, where formerly Pennsylvania German-speaking people had the majority, would be important evidence for substrata theories in general. R. Whitney Tucker (6) notices only very few substitutions in the dialect, and is therefore very skeptical as to the existence of a "Pennsylvania English." He mentions, however, the very striking intonation in the English of some Pennsylvania Germans.

IV.—The lack of generally recognized standards for spelling, which is usually a mixture of the German and English ones, makes a phonemic interpretation of dialect literature very difficult, especially because there are no field-records in existence. It would be easier to write a study of the vocabulary and syntax of the material in papers like the **Reading Adler** (1796-1931), the **Bucks County Express,** etc., or in the works of one of the dialect writers. Professor W. L. Werner of Pennsylvania State College informs the writer that Miss Mildred Runyon wrote a master's thesis on "Pennsylvania German in the Reading Adler, 1837-1857."

V.—I should like to call attention to the influences that can be drawn from English loan-words in the Pennsylvania German dialect on American English at the time of borrowing.

The words **Grick** and **Bossum** in Pennsylvania German show that the dialectal forms **crick** and **possum** (opossum) were most frequently heard by the immigrants. The form **boi** presupposes a similar rustic pronunciation for the English **pie.**

Just as loan-words in Finnish have thrown light on features of Primitive Germanic, so too it seems to me possible to draw important inferences by way of the Pennsylvania German loan-words from American English. The **ae**—type for Middle English English **a** short before **r** is proved by the evidence of grammarians for Englands in the eighteenth century, for America until the middle of the nineteenth century. The pronunciations **kaer, haerd, paerti** for car, hard and party, are indicated by B. Franklin (1768), D. Mackintosh (1797), etc., and rhymes and spellings furnish further evidence. Not one of the field-records of the Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada or any other sources show any traces of this **ae**—type for Middle English **a** short before **r.** It seems to have died out completely in modern American English. The loan-words in Pennsylvania German were largely taken over in the eighteenth century, i. e., at a time when the **ae**—type was prevalent. The palatal sound, that was also used for rendering Middle English **a** long (e. g. **Laedy**), occurs generally in them: **schmaert—paerty, gemaertscht, kaerpet,** for smart, party, marched and carpet. The explanation of the spelling of immigrant names **Barger, Warfel, Garver,** for **Berger, Werfel** and **Gerber** (7) must very likely be sought in the rendering of the dialectal pronunciation. But the frequency and consistency of this change in spelling makes one wonder whether the "official" High German pronunciation of such proper names should not even once have asserted itself in this connection. The explanation offers itself that the spelling "ar" was pronounced **aer** and not **ar** in American English at that time. We see that loan-words in Pennsylvania German throw light on an important feature of the historical grammar of American English.

To summarize briefly: the investigation of the Pennsylvania German dialect is in all its important aspects still in its beginning. Everything can still be done, if it is done early enough, before the corruption and destruction has made further progress, before the number of speakers has dwindled down, and further characteristics have been lost. Phonetical recording in the field would provide a basis for studies that are most important from the linguistic point of view, as e. g. (1), on the local types of the dialect; (2) on their relationship to German dialects of the present time; (3) on change of language, disappearance of language and the substrata problem; (4) on phonology, vocabulary, and syntax of the written sources; and (5) on American English through important inferences to be drawn from the dialect.

1.—KNAUSS. **Proceedings of the Pennsylvania German Society**, Vol. 29.

2.—**Proceedings.** Vol. 12 (Lee L. Gumbine)

3.—**Proceedings.** Vol. 26 (1918)

4.—**Mitteilungen der Akademie zur wissenschaftlichen Erforschung und Pflege des Deutschtums, 1931.**

5.—"The Origin of the Pennsylvania German Dialect" in Preston A. Barba's **Pennsylfawnisch Deitsch Eck** (Allentown Morning Call), Nov., 1935.

6.—"Linguistic Substrata in Pennsylvania and elsewhere." **Language X** (March 1934).

7.—**Pennsylvania Archives**, 2nd Series, Vol. XVII. p. 238 ff.

Der Holz-Hacker

Gut Holz zu hacke is en Sach,
Die net en jeder kann;
Net jeder stellt sich in des Fach,
Net jeder is der Mann!

'S k'hoert meh derzu wie'n guti Ax,
Vum allerfeinste Stahl;
Un Holz vum allerschoennste Wachs,
Un vun der beste Wahl.

'S k'hoert meh derzu wie starke Aerm,
Un'n Brust voll frischer Muth;
Meh wie Gemaul un'n groszer Laerm,
Un meh wie Geld un Gut.

En scharfi Ax, wie'n Henkerbeil,
Die hackt mit Schall un Krach;
Un Kraft un Muth, un Fleisz un Eil,
Sin gut; doch net die Sach!

En rechter Hacker hot sei Ziel,
Un drefft's mit jedem Streech;
Zu wennig net, un net zu viel,
So geht die Sach vum Steeg.

Ball hackt er rechts, ball hackt er links,
Un wechselt oefters um;
Un wie er's dut, so schoe un flinks,
Des is gewisz net dum.

Was fliege doch die helle Spae,
Mit jedem Krach uf Krach;
Er steht so ruhig in der Hoeh,
Un macht just immer: "Ach!"

Wie blueht un schmunzelt sei Gesicht,
Er hot die Sach im Griff;
Des is en Kunst, wie er's verricht,
Un net "en leerer Piff!"

* * * * *

Un wann's ah uf der Kanzel waer,
Un in der Sunndag-Schul;
Hack niemahls just "vun Ungefaehr,"
Des mach der schoe zum Rule.

'S k'hoert meh derzu wie'n groszi Stimm,
Un meh wie'n grosz Geschrei;
Des waer doch werklich gar zu schlimm,
En Esel so zu sei!

Setz jedes mol en rechtes Ziel,
Verschwend ken Bische Staerk;
Des helft der unausspraechlich viel
Im allerbeste Werk.

Hack ruhig uf dei Ziel druf nei,
Un seufz dei stilles: "Ach!"
So kannst du en Holz-Hacker sei,
Un des is grad—die Sach!

Zionsville.
Feb. 5, 1892

—ELI KELLER
1825-1919

(The orthography is that of the manuscript in the Muhlenberg College Library).